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Propers 13 (Pentecost 9) Series A 2017

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – (Proper 13) August 6

Food is such a good image that Jesus makes tremendous use of it and the whole of Scripture probably compares God's great work to a feast as much as to anything else. Today, we get the food imagery. Isaiah summons the folks to a feast and Jesus feeds the thousands. As we have been developing the rest aspect this summer, the preacher who is on that theme will notice that Isaiah offers food at no cost. You don't labor for this feast. Jesus feeds the multitudes with bread and fish which miraculously are multiplied. No sweaty brows here, but a taste of Eden restored.

Of course we have a regular reminder of this. The Lord's Supper is an actualization of the food metaphor. Jesus invites us to dine upon himself. We take the Holy One and the holiness of God inside ourselves and the old adage of "you are what you eat" becomes more and more true of us as we return to that table time and again. We call it the foretaste of the feast to come which is heaven. It is the very forgiveness of sins of which we partake.

Let us consider for just a moment the powerful impact of food on our lives and see therein the very Gospel message.

- 1. We need food to survive. The calories and the nutrients which we taken into ourselves through eating are essential to the sustaining of this bodily life. It is necessary. So too is this supper and this feasting which is Jesus. Without Jesus, the author of life, we are but a coffee pot that has been unplugged. We might be warm for a while, but before long we achieve ambient temperature – death.*
- 2. Food is essential to joy. Try throwing a party without food. It doesn't work. Christ not only makes us alive, but he gives us a great joy as well. The Scriptures do not invite us to enjoy a tasteless protein bar which has all the necessary nutrients or some military style ration which sustains us but tastes terrible. God invites to a feast, something to enjoy. We celebrate the Lord's Supper, we "lift up our hearts," we rejoice at the words of absolution. We can rejoice even in terrible circumstances because this is not the end of our story. Jesus is the end of our story and He is life.*
- 3. Food is an entry point into our community. Women have often joked that the way into a man's heart is through his stomach. Successful salesmen often take a client to lunch, aware that it is harder to say no to someone with whom you have eaten. Indeed there is more to it than this. Salesmen also take clients to lunch because it is an opportunity to have exclusive time with that client. But that also can work. The Lord would rather have you eating with him than anyone else. The dynamics of this don't necessarily make sense when you think about it rationally, but it is so. Why does food make us more sociable? I don't know. Jesus enters our life, spends time with us through eating. Is our penchant for fast food convenience, food on our terms, showing up in our congregational life which has no time for a sacramental presence of Christ? Are we looking for something nutritious, delicious, and wholesome everywhere but at the table?*

4. *Food unites us and reunites us. All our most important family events usually center on a meal. Reunions, Weddings, Thanksgiving and Christmas, and many more events almost always involve a feast of some sort. So too does the grace of God unite us into his holy people. We no longer can see the differences in quite the same way. The wealth, race, gender, or education which may have once divided me from my neighbor is rendered meaningless in light of the fact that the Son of God died for that person. Jesus unites us as well.*
5. *Food communicates important things. Our first experience of love from our mother was really as she fed us. It is primordial in its effect on us. We give chocolates to our sweetie on Valentine's Day. Don't try giving her a can of beans. Our mom probably expressed her love for us by feeding us when we came home from college. When someone dies in our close community, we often bring the widow or widower something to eat. We are telling that person we grieve with them and are concerned for them. When my dad died, I was astounded at the amount of food which was given to us. Jesus is God's message of love to us. Food is how we show hospitality.*
6. *Food is important for our sense of beauty. What I eat has to taste, feel, look, smell, even sound right when I dine. We have a whole discipline of food presentation – one can take classes in how to present food. Science could probably make a tasteless sludge which would meet all our nutritional needs but we would likely starve. So too, Jesus brings beauty to my life. I don't think it is an accident that the pinnacle of art is usually seen to be in Europe in the 16th-19th centuries. A careful investigation of the masters will find that they were often quite religious, or had been. Bach is the obvious choice but so were D'Vinci and Michelangelo. Van Gogh had been a seminary student and even Mozart would die writing a Mass. I also don't think it is a coincidence that when Europe started losing its religious soul the art entered a pit of banality and meaningless anti-technique. I know this opens me to the charge of being a cultural imperialist, but I cannot help but wonder why the Japanese celebrate the New Year with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.*
7. *So many of our trends today are related to food. We have become food aficionados. In Portland these days it is food carts, Voodoo Donuts, and Thai fusion cuisine. The things we eat often define use, especially as we think about being "in" or "out" of fashion.*
8. *Hungry people are grumpy people. Likewise a community or people that have no relationship with God or a thin, tasteless relationship with God is often a very crabby people or certainly a dysfunctional society. Food makes families function better. It enhances Joy (#2 above). Families that eat together are incredibly important for the health and wellbeing of the young people who sit at those tables. Teachers will tell you that they can pick out of a classroom the students that don't eat with their families regularly.*

9. *Food has certain connotations for us. Turkey is eaten on Thanksgiving Day, hot cross buns on the weekend of Easter. God gave bitter herbs and unleavened bread to remind the people of the exodus. There are certain foods that our mom can prepare which will bring us back to childhood almost immediately. There are certain foods which simply are essential to certain days, events, or relationships.*
10. *We also abuse food, it is a great good that can become a great problem in our lives as well. The abuse of our relationship with God also has great potential to be problematic in our whole life. People who are bulimic or anorexic have an eating disorder and they are not eating food for sustenance, but as a psychological crutch of some sort. Likewise the person who chugs a couple gallons of Mountain Dew every day will eventually be diabetic. We can be so focused on the sweetness that we miss the real nutritive.*
11. *Not all food today is appropriate for all people. We are used to babies eating a modified diet, Paul even talks about his audience who is not ready for the meat of what he has to say. But today we cannot distribute the host without a little dish of gluten free wafers nearby, and the tray of individual cups likely has a section which has alcohol free wine for the folks who cannot tolerate that. Every dinner party we throw, we have to ask if anyone is vegan or allergic or lactose intolerant. Food is getting to be more and more complex. How does this affect the food imagery we might want to use as we preach?*

The preacher will want to keep some of this in mind today as we consider the feeding of the thousands and the call of Isaiah. Food is not just nutrients, it is far more. The powerful Gospel preached will take advantage of all these or develop one of them. We are dealing with something mysterious in all this. It does not all make perfect sense and yet we can see it around us. God has created in food an almost perfect metaphor for the Gospel.

I believe the Devil has tried to work against this. Food is no longer to be enjoyed by people. Calories are an enemy and we have become such connoisseurs of cuisine that we can hardly enjoy that meal our mom would set before us when we came home from college on break. It is as though the imagery of food has been spoiled by the overabundance of it. Our refrigerators are full and so when Jesus says heaven is a feast, we think of the last time we were at the Home Town Buffet and get rather passé about the whole affair. I heard a chef speak in an interview the other day who said that we really enjoy only the first three bites of a dish. After that a law of diminishing returns takes over. So he serves multi-course meals but each course is tiny, always leaving the customer wanting more. A seat at his restaurant in the San Francisco area will cost you many hundreds of dollars this evening. We will pay a great deal for the eating experience to be just right.

Collect

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for

all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

We do not deserve your goodness... The Christian lives his life aware of the fact that we don't deserve all the good stuff that God has given us. It is all a gift, and as a result we are thankful. There is nothing good in this life that we have earned from his hand. God cannot be bought, either in terms of the daily bread we eat or the heaven we hope for. Several years ago I read an article by Pr. Russell Saltzman. You can find it at <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2011/07/death-beds>. Look for the lady who died saying thank-you.

How does the food imagery fit into the bit about willing obedience? The giftedness and the thanksgiving we pretty well get as Lutherans who say grace before meals. But what about the willing obedience thing? Here I would go to the doctrine of vocation. The whole of life is really rendered as a service to God. We love the Lord with the whole person, and the neighbor as ourselves. This is willingly done only in light of the acknowledgement and thanksgiving.

But God in fatherly divine goodness and mercy does indeed provide for all our needs of body and soul. God provides for the whole person, intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and relational. The Lord makes all this happen, we cannot create this, we can grow the physical food, but it is God who makes the food. The Daily Bread of the Lord's Prayer is really, as Luther notes, is about the whole person, not just calories. Jesus noted that He sends the rain upon all of us, good and wicked. Which one are you? We ask God here to grant us the Holy Spirit so we may do three things. First acknowledge that these are all gifts. "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest and let these gifts to us be blest." Secondly we want to give thanks for these benefits, and third we ask that might serve in willing obedience.

I think this progression is really important in order that the obedience be a willing obedience. Obedience is not hard to come by. Hold a gun to the head of most folks or offer them a \$1,000 and you can get them to do just about anything. But willing obedience is a whole other story. This is the obedience which is born of love and respect and most of all, of faith. This is the obedience of which Paul speaks in chapter 1 of Romans, the obedience of faith. In order to have that obedience God must be the initiator of the action. He first reaches out to us in our undeserving and rebellious state. By his Spirit's gift we are given to see that, realize it is for us, and then, in that attitude of thanksgiving we realize that our life is now empowered to live differently. It is not a purchase, nor some obligation which has been laid upon us, but it is simply the description of who we are created to be in Christ.

We pray to be that sort of person. The answer to that prayer is in God's hands, not mine. It might be a very good exercise and helpful, in a law development sort of way, to closely analyze our prayers. Do we pray acknowledgment and thanksgiving? Or do we pray only for the things that we want – and does our obedience become the sour obedience of the put-upon servant?

Readings

Isaiah 55:1-5

“Come, everyone who thirsts,

come to the waters;

and he who has no money,

come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk

without money and without price.

² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,

and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,

and delight yourselves in rich food.

³ Incline your ear, and come to me;

hear, that your soul may live;

and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,

my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴ Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,

a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵ Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,

and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,

because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,

for he has glorified you.

Come and buy without money. Already in the first verse you get the idea that this metaphor is about to break under the strain. Certainly this fits no economic model which we find operative or sustainable. The metaphor which would convey the Gospel is carrying a heavy load and no metaphor can bear it all. Isaiah is really combining two metaphors, a physical metaphor of eating and drinking and an economic metaphor of buying and getting for free. But what is this food to which he calls us?

In verse two we are chided for investing our effort in the wrong place, bread that is not bread and things which do not satisfy. (Is he talking about Wonder Bread here?) As the verse continues, however, the metaphor shifts to a listening image. Listen and eat, delight in a rich food, incline your ear. It is as though we are feasting through our ears. As I said earlier, the metaphor is about to break here. Yet, this listening as eating picture is not entirely absent from our vocabulary. We can feast on a concert or say that music is a feast for our ears. I bet your local newspaper has used the image to describe the summer concert series in your community within the last couple of months.

This listening feast is not a concert. It is food because we need it to live, it delights our ears because it is the beautiful and wonderful word of God. It is the covenant like the covenant which

he made with his beloved David. He went from nothing, a shepherd boy to becoming the great king of an ancient superpower. His rise from obscurity to the very heights is the witness to God's promise making and keeping.

What is he promising us? The people at the time of Isaiah were to call a nation they did not know. That nation shall run to them because God has glorified them.

I don't think you have to get too far out there to imagine that the gentile nations which have been streaming into the Christian movement for the past 80 generations are what Isaiah is talking about. The glorification is the thing which I find interesting. This word is the Hebrew word for "heavy" or "significant" Jesus will use this word to interesting effect in John, essentially suggesting that he is glorified in the crucifixion. It would seem that the glorification of the people of Israel is when God takes up humanity and walks as one of them. On that day they are heavy, significant. This attractiveness which calls and draws people at a run is connected to this radically strange doctrine of Christianity that Jesus is God.

Too often we have hidden the oddness of our faith, trying to make ourselves palatable to the general public lest they think us strange. We see how they treat strange people and we don't want that to happen to us. But God has done a really strange thing in the incarnation, a truly odd deed. No self-respecting ruler of the universe gives up his power and becomes a helpless infant in a manger, carried by his parents in a flight to Egypt as they flee from a doddering fool of a tyrant like Herod. No God worth his salt will be found on a cross, dying for the miserable little wretches that screwed up his creation. But there he is. Has our aversion to being odd kept our most potent attractor under wraps?

The covenant which God made with David is another point which one could work here. Yes, David is a great rags to riches sort of story. But it is also the covenant of a God who did not let the sins of David get in the way of his love. David had lots of sins, big ones. We are abhorred by David's adultery, lies, murder, and bloodshed. God was not. We are dismayed when we see our own sins, God is not. That is the covenantal love which he showed to David and which this passage proclaims to us.

Tell me what you think about this on Tuesday.

Psalm 136:1-9 (23-26)

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

² *Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

³ *Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁴ *to him who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;*

⁵ to him who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁶ to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁷ to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁸ the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
⁹ the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁰ *to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹¹ *and brought Israel out from among them,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹² *with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹³ *to him who divided the Red Sea in two,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁴ *and made Israel pass through the midst of it,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁵ *but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁶ *to him who led his people through the wilderness,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁷ *to him who struck down great kings,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁸ *and killed mighty kings,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁹ *Sihon, king of the Amorites,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
²⁰ *and Og, king of Bashan,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
²¹ *and gave their land as a heritage,*
for his steadfast love endures forever;
²² *a heritage to Israel his servant*
for his steadfast love endures forever.
²³ It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

²⁴ and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

²⁵ he who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

²⁶ Give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

I love this psalm for this refrain. Using it in worship settings is quite countercultural for us in one way. We always want something new, but here the response is always the same old response. It feels weird when you do it, but that phrase has a delightful way of worming its way inside you. I would encourage you to consider using the Psalm, either the shortened option or the whole thing. Have the reader read the first half and let the congregation respond with the second half of each verse. Each of the elements gets the same response. It is not the way we usually speak or worship, but it is good.

The elided verses from the middle of the psalm recount the Exodus events. Names like Og and Sihon don't have the same resonance with us and I guess the editors feel that it is just not worth explaining. I wonder about that conclusion sometimes.

Romans 9:1-5 (6-13)

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Here is where Calvin's deep reading of Romans really begins to diverge from Luther. If you are familiar with Calvin and more likely with Calvinism, they have a great focus on the “Sovereignty of God”. Luther read the first part almost psychologically and certainly existentially. The book

of Romans for Luther was about his relationship with God. Calvin read Romans, and particularly this this second part, in terms of administration and power. I think both of them got part of this right but not the whole thing.

The setting for Paul's letter to the Romans is important. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem. His intention is to deliver the relief funds he has been gathering from the gentile congregations to the suffering Christians of Jerusalem where a famine has made their lives miserable. After that he wants to visit Rome and establish there a home base for an anticipated mission to the people of the Spanish peninsula. It won't work out that way. In Jerusalem he will be the occasion of a riot among the Jews. The Romans will arrest him to save his life and he will be put on trial. Finally, because Palestinian politics are so convoluted and he wants to get to Rome anyway, he appeals to Caesar.

He is on his way back from his third missionary journey, a journey in which he has been raising funds for famine relief in Jerusalem but also dealing with internal issues at the congregations he founded on his first two missionary journeys. Throughout his sojourn among the congregations of Asia Minor and Greece, his chief antagonists have been the Judaizing crowd. Reading Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and other letters suggests that he spent a great deal of time contending with those of his own brethren who insisted that his message was a perversion of the Torah. Paul asserts, perhaps most forcefully in this letter, that in fact the Christian faith which is the faith of Jesus, is in fact the authentically Jewish expression of Torah. The perversion is the legalism of his opponents which would limit God's love to those who meet their standards.

Here in chapter nine and following Paul seems to be setting up the implications of what he has said in the first chapters of his letter to the Romans. I think he is trying to describe the Christian community. This is what a church looks like. To do that he grabs the biggest and most important conflict he has experienced and runs that through the grace and forgiveness model he has established in the first part. It is interesting to note that he speaks in generalities here. He doesn't actually know very many people in Rome, some, but not many. He is not addressing a specific problem in the Roman congregation, it seems, but is addressing a problem which may have afflicted all first century Christian congregations. What makes this especially hard for us to understand today is that by the end of the first century this problem will have largely gone away. Not many of us are plagued by a Judaizing element; although, uncharitable comparisons to Pharisees and other ne'er-do-wells abound in Synodical discussions. That said, the translation into contemporary terms can be difficult.

Here in this first part of chapter 9, Paul is laying out the problem as he sees it. It is not a problem with the Torah nor a problem with the promise or with Jesus. It is not a personal animosity on Paul's part. All these things are working the way they are supposed to. His opponents have been given great gifts, but something is not connecting here. Paul wishes that he could be cut off and they could be saved, but it doesn't work that way. How can we be at this sort of an impasse? You will have to read further to see some of Paul's answers to that question, but

more importantly we need to remember where this is going. Paul will argue that Jew and Gentile have essentially been united in Christ. The divisions, even when they insist on them, are not real. The congregation which is in Christ is empowered to forgive and live differently than the association of people who are still in that old system of balancing scales and getting even.

Forgetting that part is where I think Calvin got it wrong. Paul is indeed talking about God's sovereignty here, but that is not the goal of what he is talking about. That is one of the pieces of the puzzle he is laying out here. The solution is not God's sovereign power but God's gracious love.

I think this text is especially hard because it ends with that difficult statement that God hated Esau. That seems rather harsh to us. But we need to remember the OT lesson from last week. There are those who experience the enmity of God. If we lose this, effectively removing the fangs from the Lion, we have fundamentally got a different God on our hands.

This is a tough text, and the preacher who knows his congregation well will want to tackle these issues because he preaches the whole council of God. The preacher who is not so familiar and secure with the flock to whom he preaches will likely turn to the Gospel reading.

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This miracle appears in all four of the Gospel accounts, so we get it every year. The Holy Spirit must have thought it was really important that he repeated it four times for us. This seems like the spiritual equivalent of a 2x4 to the head. If you don't get it by the fourth time you have to be pretty thick.

Each of the tellings, however, is a little different. Like the resurrection stories, each Gospel writer wants you to see something just a little different here. Matthew paints a picture of Jesus

wanting to get away by himself. His love and compassion, however, draws him to them and he heals and teaches the multitudes that have streamed from the towns and villages to seek him out. Jesus' priorities are demonstrated here. He is seeking time to be alone, but they pursue him. The word for "compassion" used here is visceral. Just before this, in the earlier verses of chapter 14, Jesus heard of John the Baptist's brutal death at Herod's hands. He seeks some time alone, understandably, but now he sees the suffering of these people. He is moved, viscerally moved to do something for them. This compassion will bring him to a cross.

The Christian who is washed in the water of Baptism is imbued with the Spirit of Jesus. This same compassion lives in us. The Jesus who said, "You feed them" is also speaking to us, and filling us with the faith of the disciples and empowering our service. See the Dorothy Day illustration below. Jesus throws a pretty serious challenge down before his disciples today. They note the hungry crowds and Jesus says, "You feed them." When JFK challenged the nation to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, it looked very impossible to do. But they did it. Is this a day for us to issue a challenge to our folks? We can look at the resources we have and what we think is possible and think accordingly small. Or we can look at the one who blesses our lives and our ministry and set a much larger goal. We might just feed many more than 5,000.

We also noticed that this was a desolate place. God had a history of meeting people with food in desolate places. The Israelites ate manna in the desert. Elijah was fed by the angel under a broom tree in the desert. The folks were running to that desolate place to encounter God and to have God meet their needs. I am reminded of the many Hindus who show up at Zion Lutheran Church in Kodaikanal, India because they believe that prayers for healing which are spoken in that place are heard. They process down the aisle on their knees. They are searching for the bread that really satisfies them (Isaiah 55).

The disciples are worried they recognize the spiritual hunger for Jesus, but are thinking of a much smaller problem, their physical hunger. A few thousand hungry people can be a problem, a big problem. Hungry people are grumpy people. They may also be simply concerned for the folks who are there. Jesus says, "Give them something to eat." To the disciples it is an impossible command. The disciples admit to limited resources, five loaves of bread and two fish, not really enough even for the twelve of them to have much more than a bite. But Jesus says, "Bring it here." I think it is important to notice that Jesus asks for all that they have. He does not say that they should hold back enough for themselves and then share the excess. He asks for it all. He blesses and breaks the five loaves and presumably hands them back to the disciples and tells them to feed the crowds now seated on the grass. At this point Peter and the gang are holding five loaves of bread and two fish and looking at five thousand hungry people. I wonder if they whispered "Come and get it."

I imagine them reaching into a basket with five pieces of bread and getting to the sixth person and wondering what would happen. There was another piece of bread, and another, and another. Finally, we are told that all five thousand were fed, and that was just counting the men.

Who knows how many women and children were there too. Just in case you are really dense and missed the implication of Christ feeding the nation of Israel like Moses in the wilderness, Matthew tells you that they gathered twelve baskets of leftovers.

For the people of the ancient world, food was a major concern. Most of the folks at Jesus time were living on a protein deficient diet. Anthropologists who examine the bones of the peasants from the era have commented on their short stature and frequent bone deformities which suggest that as children they were not getting enough to eat. You and I would be considered a giant by most of these folks. They would have been astounded by what we call a meal. How can we eat so much?

This picture of Jesus whipping up a meal for 5,000 out of a handful of bread and fish was especially powerful for them, perhaps more so than for us; although, the story continues to fascinate and challenge us today. It is the story of the Garden of Eden given back to humanity for just a moment. For a moment, we ate not by the sweat of our brow but from God's gracious hand once more. The fall into sin was a little bit undone. Of course that is the message in most of Jesus miracles, especially the familiar healing and cleansing miracles, but it seems most potently stated here and in the raising of the dead for these are directly mentioned in Genesis 3.

This text asks us to expect something of God. What do we expect? He still loves to feed hungry people and does so around the world today through his servants. Do we look at our resources and pass on the opportunity to feed or help another because we don't know if we have enough for ourselves and thus miss out on the promise and the miracle which he offers? I have often used the story of the foodbank we started in Utah for this. Once we started God brought in unseen donations and soon we were feeding ten times the people we thought we could help. We gave no more but God sure did.

Three years ago we thought about the Malachi text in which he exhorts the people to bring the whole tithe and test God to see if he won't open up the very heavens for us. (Malachi 3:10) God invites a test from his people. Jesus issues a test to the disciples. Bring it to me, I will bless it, and we will see what happens. But if you never bring the bread and fish, and he never blesses them, then nothing happens. You have five loaves and two fish.

How often don't we tell Jesus to solve our congregation's budget problems, and then we will help our neighbors. I think this text is suggesting that we step out in faith. Or if we do actually start to help our neighbors, we think of it as a mechanism to build the congregation so they can take care of the budget problem for us. But this is manipulative. This text is really asking us to simply feed the neighbor. God will take care of the resources, God will take care of the institution/congregation which is engaged in his ministry.

This text also commends the disciples for their concern for the people. It portrays them in a parallel with Christ, where we always want to be but then it challenges them with Jesus' words.

“You feed them.” When we pray for the lost we should expect Him to turn to us and say, “You go to them, you help them.”

If you want a controversial but fascinating story about this, read up on Dorothy Day. She was a total bohemian wild girl who was converted to Christianity. In reading this story she heard Jesus speak these words to his disciples and said “I am a disciple!” So she started feeding folks out of the back door of her flat. This was the time of the Great Depression in New York. Pretty soon she had hundreds of folks lining up for a cup of coffee and a sandwich. She would powerfully identify with the poor, so much so that socialists and others would try to co-opt her movement, but it all started when she read this story, heard Jesus speak, and did something in response to His command. You can find a Wikipedia article about her at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Day

If you want another great and similar story, consider the founder of Habitat for Humanity, Millard Fuller. You can read about him at <http://www.habitat.org/how/millard.aspx?tgs=Ny8yMi8yMDExIDExOjM2OjU5IFBN>

This text also speaks of our stewardship of things. The disciples are asked to give all, all is blessed, all is returned to them, and all is given. The implication is that it was not a gift in part. How often does God only get our left-overs? What does that mean for ministry?

Law

1. We need food to survive. Without it, we die. We are not able to live on our own. The myth of self-sufficiency is especially treacherous because by the time we realize it is a myth, it is often too late to seek help. Likewise, our very existence hangs on our connection to God. Without Him, we are as good as dead.
2. Sin has rendered us stupid about a lot of things. We think we earn our money, we think we own our house, we think we control our own bodies. All good comes from God and it is utter thick-headedness which refused to recognize it. As a result we often expend energy on things that don't satisfy us and bread that does not really feed us. We look for healing from the wrong places and contentment in the accumulation of things. We are just as miserable as before but now we have a bunch of things which seem to mock us with their presence and our misery.
3. Our foolish and sinful hearts and heads tend to think of ourselves first and then look to the needs of others only from our excess. “Just give up one Latte a month and you can feed a village in ...” We don't really ask the truly sacrificial questions of ourselves, they are too frightening. But the half given gift is not accepted by God. It is all or nothing.

4. God has charged his people with a hefty responsibility. Go make disciples of all nations. I have a hard enough time with my own house and a neighbor or two. My resources look too thin for that charge. My congregation is grey and old. What can we do?
5. God's promises are hard to believe. He persistently refuses to prove Himself to our satisfaction, but points us to distant people like David and uses them as a witness. He calls for us to believe him without the undergirding support which our empirical minds crave. It terrifies us.
6. Because we find these promises hard to believe, often we are silent about them, fearing that others will not be able to accept them and best not to talk about them. We don't want to appear odd or foolish.

Gospel

1. Jesus is the Bread of Life. His death on a cross is as essential to us as the food we eat. Without Him, we die eternally, cut off from God, cut off from life. We become vacuous vapors, food for demons and worms.
2. God knows how twisted and warped our sinful minds and hearts are. He has bridged the gap in His Son and he speaks to us in metaphor and language we can understand and which contains his power to re-create and change us.
3. God has empowered his total claim by his total gift. Jesus does not ask for anything that he has not himself given. When he demands our whole self it is because he has given his whole self. That gift is the empowerment for our self-giving. God delights in our sacrifices, large and small on his behalf. He will take a small gift as a way to draw out the whole gift, patiently and slowly bringing us to maturity in Christ.
4. God's great compassion for the lost and the hungry of this world empowers our actions as well. When we take up his holy tasks, we do so confident that he has the resources to see the thing through. I may not know where they are, but I know he has them. This is humbling because I lose much control in all this, but it is also freeing because I am no longer the definer of success nor am I entirely responsible for success. God may use my failure to do much greater things than I ever envisioned!
5. God has poured out the Holy Spirit so that I may not only hear and believe the promises about me, but also the promises which God has made about the whole world. The faith which trusts those promises is not of my own creation/manufacture. I do not squint my eyes and grit my teeth and "believe." God calls me and in his very words is the power to create that for which he calls. Yes, God asks me to believe some very difficult things, but nothing is impossible for God. And so when I speak of God's great promises to others and I fear that I am sounding like some religious wacko, I also know that I am speaking God's promises and he creates the ability for that person to believe them along with me.

Sermon Themes:

1. You Feed Them (Gospel Lesson – That the Spirit of God would embolden the hearers to step forward into impossible ministry, confident that God works with, through, and beside them to accomplish great kingdom deeds.)

Jesus looks over our town today with the same compassion with which he looked over the multitudes which teemed around him in the deserts of Palestine so long ago. We too see them and pray for Him to do something and what he does is send us. “Feed them” he says. Through us he extends that same Gospel call that Isaiah prophesied when he envisioned the nations streaming to Israel and especially Israel’s Davidic heir, our King Jesus. He makes our willing service in response to His call possible.

- a. He moves us by his compassion – he loves us with that love and now he fills us with that same love
- b. He potently and lovingly calls for our whole life by his sacrifice of his whole self. He has given all so that he may lovingly and rightly lay claim to our whole self.
- c. His blessing makes our actions, no matter how pitiable and small they may seem to us, the moments of His great kingdom work. The disciples turned around and faced the multitude with five loaves of bread and two fish. God sends us out into this community with a budget that barely balances, a congregation of sinners, and many challenges that look far too large for us to handle. His promise is that He is our bank, he is our helper, he makes the five loaves and two fish enough.

This is not a sermon for wimps. You will be challenging your people to do some frightening things. The disciples must have been terrified to turn around and see five thousand hungry people and only to hold in their hands the broken pieces of five loaves and two fish. If you get what I am intending here, you will have your folks look upon this community the same way. It is nice and safe to give some money to world missions and send some bloke around the world to bring the Gospel to strangers. It is a completely different thing to talk about really serving and loving the folks in your own community, the ones who really need it.

2. Come Buy Without Cost – A Rest for God’s People (OT and Gospel Lesson – That the Holy Spirit of God would strengthen the faith of hearer to receive His gifts with gratitude and respond with willing obedience.)

This sermon continues our rest theme this summer. Isaiah calls us to buy without money. Jesus feeds the multitudes with bread they have not sweated to grow, mill, or bake and fish they have not labored to catch, clean, and cook. No one did, that is the point, beyond the starter loaves and fish this was outside the Genesis 3 consequences of Sin.

Of course this whole feast is Christ to us and for us. He has given us the life which we could not obtain or retain, he has washed us of our sins, he has restored us to the grace and love of God our Creator, more than that, he has given us his very relationship with God and we may now call God “Our Father.”

It is not only foolish to try and buy this bread with money or works of any kind, it is downright insulting. If we offer our beloved money for her or his affections, we have turned their love into prostitution. God’s great love for us is simply not for sale. He does not respond to our goodness; rather, he has responded to our destitution and depravity. He has sent his Son because we were penniless waifs, helpless corpses.

Now he has gone beyond what we were created to be and included us in the very household of God. (See the Epistle lesson for that one!) And today he would liken this to a feast, and lest we forget it, he has made this message into the very real feast we are given to enjoy at this altar.

- a. Here he gives us life itself
- b. Here he gives us joy
- c. Here he comes into our lives and makes his home with us.
- d. Here he unites us with one another
- e. Here he blesses us with true beauty.

This gift giving has changed us, transformed us into another sort of people. Here the preacher will want to plug his congregation’s mission statement, their ethos, their ministry into this sermon.

If you have ever had a doctor compliment you on your health, you might just know the power of such gospel motivation to move us.

3. Hope in the Face of Great Difficulty (Epistle: That the Spirit of God would encourage the struggling parish and parishioner to face daunting challenges and opportunities with confidence.)

Paul had a huge problem on his hand. His fellow Jews had not jumped onto the bandwagon of Christianity. The Gentiles had jumped in and were joining the Christian movement in droves. This incited his fellow Jews to rabid jealousy and often prompted terrible attacks, some of them resulting him being stoned, thrown in prison, beaten, etc.

Many of the Jews who had become Christians really wanted to remain Jewish in their Christianity, a situation which Paul thought was OK. You could be a Christian and follow the kosher laws. In fact, it appears that Paul may have done that. But these Jewish Christians appear to have thought that the Gentile Christians should do the same. There

Paul drew the line. His letters to the Ephesians, Galatians, and others are filled with thundering denunciations of this.

But what about his fellow Jews? Were they his enemies? What was Paul's response? What was God's response? This sermon will use Paul's loving and gracious response to his enemies as a pattern for our own lives. The Christ who lived in Paul lives in us as well. Paul never lost his hope for his fellow Jews, longing for this situation to change. It looked insurmountable, but he was counting on God to solve these issues.

The life of Paul is helpful here again. Paul did not live to see this play out. Indeed he would be caught up in the tensions which swirled around the Jewish and Gentile issues. He was accused of bringing a Gentile into the Jewish-only part of the temple. Arrested, he would eventually appeal his case to Caesar and would die a criminal, executed by the emperor.

But the problem was real and it did not die with Paul. By the end of the century, however, it had almost entirely resolved itself. God had a solution for which Paul could only hope. The Jewish Christian community, which was the real source of so much of Paul's conflict would be driven out by the old Jewish guard. Cast out of synagogues and excluded from the family reunions, the Jewish Christians would find a welcoming embrace in the very gentile Christians whom they had questioned.

They would maintain their status for several centuries. The last viable ancient Jewish Christian community we hear of was in Edessa, a city north and east of Jerusalem. The problem which occupied so much of Paul's life, letters, and work was solved, it ceased to be.

We face lots of problems today. Some of them seem really large and intractable. We cannot seem to see the end of these problems. God, however, has solutions which exceed our possible expectations. The disciples faced a multitude of hungry people and only had a few loaves and fish. God made it enough. Paul faced what seemed like intractable enemies, people who just could not agree with him. But God brought solutions to both of these. The descendants of the folks who hated Paul so eventually came to read and love his letters.

4. [Having the Gifts \(Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would order the whole of the congregant's life under the rubric of faith.\)](#)

[Paul has just finished his great crescendo of faithful statements. Nothing can separate us from God's love. All things work for the good of those who love Jesus. Even death is not able to keep us from God's love.](#)

[But now he has a heartache. His own fellow kinsmen, the Jews, have rejected Jesus. Paul goes on to describe a great number of gifts which they have. They have the Scriptures, the patriarchs, the promises, and the whole patrimony of the Old Testament. They are the](#)

blood relatives of Jesus himself. Yet, they are “cut off” to use Paul’s imagery here. What has happened? They have not believed/faithed in Christ.

We too have gifts. We have Luther and the Catechism. We have great wealth in this country and enormous freedoms. We have huge gifts. Too often we consider ourselves poor and without resources, but consider Jesus and the disciples in the Gospel lesson before you go there. Jesus tells them to feed the multitudes with only a beggar’s lunch and they feed them, satisfy them, and collect more leftovers than they started with.

What makes that possible? Is it not the same Jesus who promises to be in our midst today. We can have all sorts of gifts, but a loveless Lutheranism and a congregation which relies on its own resources will go nowhere. It is only when those gifts are organized under faith in Christ that they go anywhere. The disciples learned that lesson when they fed the multitudes and the people whom Paul anguishes over do not need more gifts, they need to believe the promises given and enjoy those gifts given them Christ.

Too often we as individuals and as congregations act not out of faith but out of some self-sufficiency. We look at our own resources and find them lacking and in that an excuse to fear and do very little. We hoard the little we have and as a result come off as miserly and miserable folk. But Christ has made great promises to us. We are bought with a price, Christ’s own blood. As Paul has just gotten done saying, if Christ is for us who can be against us? Who can accuse us? Christ has died for us. Can anything oppose us? Not really. We have Jesus in our bank account and in home and in our life itself. We are never short of gifts if he is there. We cannot promise success on our terms, but we can promise blessing on his terms.

5. A Tale of Two Meals (Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would transform the preacher and the hearers to look for, expect, and count on the blessings of God.)

There were really two feedings on the day Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. The first one is obvious – the poor hungry people who ate and were satisfied with the loaves and fish that Jesus blessed.

But there is another feasting that happens that day. The disciples first come to Jesus with a small minded, narrow expectation. They want Jesus to send all these folks away to get something, they want to shed the responsibility. But Jesus enjoins them to feed these folks. He is also feeding the disciples and that second meal is the one this sermon really wants to dwell upon.

Our people likewise struggle to count on the blessings of God. We always want to play small and safe games, we do not dream large, counting on the fact that God loves our ministry and blesses his mission. We count our pennies, our treasurers dutifully report

just how little money we have. We note with every funeral that we are getting fewer and fewer. We are like those disciples. We don't have enough.

But Jesus wants them and us to see that he is at work here and that means we cannot enumerate the resources he has given us. We have to dream big. Jesus fed them spiritually that day, he enlarged their hearts. Can you imagine the sermons that Andrew or John could preach for the rest of their lives? They were at the day Jesus fed the multitudes with almost nothing.

How is Jesus opening our eyes today to see not our lack but our blessings? Jesus asked them to bring all five loaves, the whole of their pitiful resources, but put into service in his kingdom it became enough, more than enough, with his blessings.

The real Gospel of this story is that the disciples were so dense about this at the beginning, but Jesus has not rejected them and started over with better disciples, he used the ones God the Father had given him. He took the dunderheads and the blind fellows and opened their eyes.

We have not gotten this right around here, but God is opening our eyes today.